

SERMON

SECOND  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH

---

460 East Main Street

Lexington, Kentucky 40507

“Your Greatest Commandment”

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Mark 12:28-31

Rev. Sara Benedetti

February 25, 2018

Love is a many splendored thing. What’s love got to do with it? All you need is love. Love me do. I would do anything for love. These are all songs titles that focus on love. And those are just the first 5 that I could think of. There are about a million more of them, and that doesn’t even include the songs about love that don’t have the word love in the title.

Our culture really likes to embrace the idea and action of falling in love. It’s all over TV and the movies. There are even the categories of rom-com and rom-dram because so many movies focus on this idea. It’s in songs and advertising. Look how over the top everything gets around Valentine’s Day. We are sort of obsessed with the idea of being in love.

But that is eros love, romantic love. It’s experienced in a lot of different ways, but it’s usually centered around the object of your desire, your partner, your significant other. It’s a love that, while it feels great and makes us happy, doesn’t focus on anyone outside the relationship. That’s a different kind of love altogether.

That different love is the love that is mentioned in our scriptures today, the love for God in response to the unconditional love that God gives to us. It is the selfless love of caring for others, putting others ahead of ourselves. And it is the love of self-appreciation, of self-compassion that we need to have for ourselves that helps us show love to others.

The passage that David read from Deuteronomy is commonly referred to as the *Shema*. This is the first word in Hebrew in the passage. It means *Hear*. “Hear O Israel...” It was to make sure that people were paying attention. Moses was sharing a message with the people of Israel that was directly from God, and the entire nation needed to make sure they heard it. They needed to let it sink in, to know that it was extremely important. And ever since then, we’ve been trying to figure out how we can do what is commanded of us, as people of God.

As Patrick Miller explains it, “The struggle of faith was and is a constant effort to discover afresh in each situation the experience of the confession that is made in the Shema and the requirements of the demand imposed by it.”

Every time that we discern what we are to do in a given situation, how we are to act, or how we are supposed to respond to events, particularly ones like the latest school shooting, we are commanded to consider how our actions and reactions love God, love ourselves, and love others. Is what we are saying helpful to the conversation? Is it supportive? Are we actually listening to others and listening to God?

Or is what we are choosing to hang our hat on something that isn’t in line with God’s desires and direction for our lives or for the greater community? Are we being selfish and

putting our desires ahead of others? Are we holding on to some feeling or tradition or entitlement out of stubbornness? Are we ignoring the cries of those in pain to feed our own egos?

Looking for and discerning God's way isn't always easy. But other times it is easy, or at the very least, clear. Is what we choose to do showing love for God and showing God's love to others and to ourselves? If not, it's not what we should be doing.

Because love is the Christian condition. It is the defining characteristic in every aspect of our faith. In the scripture reading from Mark, Christ summarizes the law in three sentences. "Love God with everything that is within you and with everything that you are capable of giving. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. There is no commandment greater than these two."

Simple. To the point. No wiggle room. You love God, and you love all people, yourself included. There is nothing about Christianity or the true and right expression of our faith in the world that isn't rooted in love.

If we are doing anything that isn't showing love for God, if we think about or treat ourselves in ways that don't show self-love and self-compassion, or if we are acting in a way that isn't loving towards others, then we are not living out our Christian faith. 1 John 4 tells us that if we don't love then we don't know God, because God IS love.

For us to love God, to claim that "The Lord our God, the Lord is one" is to put God as the priority. It was extremely important for Israel to remember this because they were constantly surrounded by other cultures that worshipped other Gods. It was tempting for them to "fit in" by adopting other gods or participating in other the religious practices of surrounding communities.

In contrast, we don't regularly, or ever, have to deal with polytheism in our lives and culture today. Our faith as Christians is not oppressed where we live. But have we given ourselves over to other types of polytheism or idols? Our political beliefs, insistence on personal rights over the safety of others, or our pride in our racial background or traditions, are those gods that we worship and hold above our dedication to and love of the One True God?

Do our worldly identities and seeming human successes edge out justice and love? The answer to those questions is simple: yes. Every single one of us has things that we put above God and love, whether it's only happened once or it happens every day. We have the freedom and the opportunity to live out the love of God in our world every day, but we so often choose not to.

In the Gospels, the fact that Jesus said that the greatest commandment was to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves was not surprising. Those commandments had been a part of the scriptures of Israel for centuries.

The amazing thing is that Jesus DID those things; he lived that life; he lived love. Everything within him and everything he ever did or said was a way of showing love to God and love for his neighbors, for us, for all people. As Christians, we are commanded to do the same.

I often think that my sermons, my Sunday School lessons, and particularly my talks for youth group can be boiled down into one simple message, perhaps even one word. I actually asked several of my youth group kids if this is true. I asked them "If you summed up the main message, topic, or lesson that I've talked about, emphasized, or taught the most as your pastor and youth leader, what would that message be?" And their responses confirmed what I was thinking.

And so I wonder if people even hear the message that I feel called to share sometimes. I imagine it could be something like what the Old Testament judges and prophets might have felt when speaking to Israel.

Over and over they warned Israel against straying away from God, did their best to remind them that God had called them specifically, that God always kept promises, that God would never abandon them if they didn't abandon God.

Sometimes when we hear the same voice speaking the same thing over and over again, it's easy to drown them out, to ignore what's being said, or to forget the importance of what they're saying.

But think about how you feel when someone who truly cares about you tells you that they love you. Think about how you feel when a coach or mentor who has trained you or worked with you for years says that you're doing a great job. Think about how you feel when someone hugs you for the 100th time but you still know that they are just as happy to see you as they were the first time they hugged you.

That's what those messages from the Old Testament are supposed to be. The judges and prophets weren't just repeating the same tired lines over and over. They believed them wholeheartedly, and they wanted Israel to believe them the same way.

So for me, that one message, this sermon, is the one that I truly believe is the most important. I've always thought that if I only had one sermon to preach, it wouldn't be long. It would have a bunch of fun stories or jokes. It wouldn't seem very deeply theological. It wouldn't be particularly eloquent or well-reasoned.

And it wouldn't have an original idea anywhere in it, some little nugget that makes people wonder why they'd never considered THAT before. It would be painfully simple, and it definitely wouldn't be very long.

So what is that message? What do I think is the most important message that we can take from scripture, from our faith, from the saving grace that is freely given to us? It's what my youth group kids said, in their various ways when I asked them what I've taught most to them. It is this: God loves everyone, and we are supposed to love God with everything in us, and to love others and ourselves as we are loved by God.

That's it. There's nothing that really needs to be added to that and nothing that should be removed. God loves us, and we respond by loving God. We are to love ourselves because God loves us. God loves all people. We are to love all people because God loves all people.

So how will you choose to love God more than you have been? How will you choose to show love to yourself, not in a prideful or conceited way, but by recognizing that you are loved by the creator of the universe and are deserving of that love? And how will you love your neighbor more fully and more effectively, because they are also loved by the creator of the universe and deserving of love from you?

Take a minute or two right now to write down the answers to those questions on the paper you got with your bulletin. You can do it silently by yourself or talk about it with other people. But think about how you can either change what you're doing or adjust something in order to embrace, experience, and show love more in your life.

I want to close with this, a Shema of a different kind, hoping that each one of us can pay close attention to what God desires.

“What does the Lord require of you? To act justly. And to love kindness. And to walk humbly with your God.”

Amen.